

*✓ ✓ ✓*

## L I ' L   A B N E R

The career of LI'L ABNER as a radio show, from November 17th, 1939 to December 13th, 1940, was so fabulous in its triumphs and so poignant in its ill-fortune that one acquainted with the title character's air and newspaper odyseys ~~can not~~ <sup>never</sup> ~~resist~~ <sup>inviting</sup> and the radio program's history cannot ~~resist~~ <sup>inviting</sup> notice ~~the~~ the parallel.

*Mr. M. S.*

When the first episode rode the NBC Red network on the night of Thursday, November 17th, 1939, ~~it~~ <sup>a</sup> LI'L ABNER's parent medium - the United Feature Syndicate strips - had reached a high in the comic strip field. From the obscurity of it's beginning in 1935 Al Capp's creation had risen to <sup>a</sup> leadership which it shared in a see-saw battle with Chic Young's BLONDIE. The Sadie Hawkins day idea had swept the country; it <sup>hadn't</sup> ~~hadn't~~ was celebrated by college fraternities, high school <sup>S.H.D.</sup> ~~S.H.D.~~ societies, and an event promoted by ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> Philadelphia newspaper drew a capacity crowd of seventeen thousand people. Close to four hundred newspapers carried the saga of Dogpatch's first citizen.

Such was the high favor of the newspaper feature when the radio version took the air. It was feared by some that the immense popularity of the comic strip might place a handicap on the radio show. They felt it would be an insuperable task to capture in dialogue and

sound the pixyishly robust comedy told graphically by Al Capp's pen, — or to find actors who could be instantly, when heard, the vocal complement of their pictures - and recognized as such by all the feature's readers.

These fears proved to be groundless. ~~Exhaustive~~ <sup>Delight</sup> study of the myriad appeals of the strip by writer and director, and exhaustive auditioning of available actors were rewarded by ~~an~~ almost unanimous decision of listeners that the radio show captured all of the subtle appeal of it's printer's ink counterpart. Hence, the vast newspaper audience which could so easily have been instantly alienated was instead inherited by the radio show.

~~In~~ the Subsequent two months much evidence was given that this was true. Over one hundred newspapers, whose readers had met the hillbilly character for the first time in his air — performances, added the comic strip to their pages.

The radio survey methods, too, reflected the success. Never in NBC's history had a sustaining serial program risen in the Crossley survey listings higher than 1.3 - not even the later commercial successes Vic and Sade, nor Girl Alone, Don Winslow had done as well in their sustaining days. Yet, within the first two months LI'L ABNER was on the air, it had risen to over 2.3. In May of 1940 the Crossley survey placed LI'L ABNER among the leading NBC sustainers - Chicago Roundtable, Arch Oboler and others - where it remained, with a rating of between 3.3 and 4.1,

UNTIL the NBC option expired and the show went off the air in December of 1940.

which includes rural communities not reached by Crosley, In the Hooper survey, LI'L ABNER fared even better, topping 6 on several occasions.

And these signal successes were won over a number of the most damning obstacles. First, since the show was sent to the network in what is called "local option time" - the period during which member stations can sell local programs unhampered by the network priorities which exist over network commercial periods - the LI'L ABNER program was carried by only two stations of the entire network on all five days of the program week. Listeners of the remaining station were handicapped by the local omission of as many as three programs in a row. Secondly, well-established the stations which carried it had such competition as Edwin C. Hill, Tom Mix and Orphan Annie. Thirdly, the network time LI'L ABNER held was vulnerable to many cancellations for news broadcasts during the frequent war crises.

The loyal following was not inarticulate about these intrusions. The unsolicited mail - (a strange conglomerate from children and adults, intellectual and otherwise) - spoke loudly in the programs behalf.

The LI'L ABNER mail was ever a fascinating and thought-provoking study. Often in a single day's mail letters of such drastic contrast as these turned up:

From a drama class at Princeton University, twenty members signing: ". . . LI'L ABNER we consider unique in radio. It treats with subtlety and intelligence a type of [redacted] radio comedy so badly handled on almost all other such programs. It's fantasy never sinks to the sickeningly maudlin A.A. Milne level. It's melodrama is delightfully tongue-in-cheek, yet its sincerity is unimpeachable. . . ."

Texas correspondent  
From an nine year old in Texas! . . . I like Little Abner because he talks so funny. I like Mammy, too. I am nine years old.

From a professor of radio at Chicago University ". . . LI'L ABNER is almost unanimously regarded as having no equal in radio, with the possible exception of Vic and Sade. . . ."

Then letters of this sort - at once pathetic and comic:

From a woman in Kentucky ". . . our station discontinued LI'L ABNER two weeks ago to put on a local program, and I want to tell you that my daughter, ten, and my son, eight cried for several hours. Can't anything be done so that we can have that fine program again? Wheeling is the closest other station to carry it, and the reception from Wheeling is almost impossible here. If LI'L Abner doesn't return soon my children are going to go back to Jack Armstrong and all that ridiculous nonsense about pirates and the Idol's ruby eye, and my husband and I can't stand that. We enjoy LI'L ABNER as much as the children do . . .

(addressed to the local affiliate)

From a lad in California . . . I am going to have to stay after school for the next two week. Would you broadcast Li'l Abner at five o'clock so I can hear it? . . .

Other letters, while not worded precisely as these, carried similar messages. They came from successful, intelligent ~~and women~~ ~~a woman~~ business men, from unsuccessful, unintelligent men, from bright, sophisticated children, from ordinary, naïve children - and on one point they reached a common agreement: they liked LI'L ABNER.

Of the three letters expressing disapproval - the only ones received - two were from persons who ~~did~~ objected to the performances of ~~is~~ the actor playing LI'L ABNER and the actress playing Daisy Mae. Both ~~volunteered~~ ~~correspondents~~ volunteered their services ~~as~~ as performers, in the interest of the show, to remedy the fault. The third letter complained, and ~~not entirely without~~ <sup>some</sup> truth, that LI'L ABNER was not ~~entirely~~ <sup>entirely</sup> educational or instructive.

A significant number of letters pointed out that, in this day of national turmoil and indecision, radio listeners appreciate the escape provided by the humor of LI'L ABNER. This is even more true at the present moment, and will probably be increasingly true, in the five years to come.

Of the actors who so completely convinced listeners of their comic strip identities - John Hodiak as Li'l Abner, Hazel Dopheide as Mammy Yokum, Clarence Hartzel (the redoubtable Uncle Fletcher of Vic and Sade) as Pappy Yokum, Mary Young and Laurette Fillbrandt as Daisy Mae and her cousin Delightful Scraggs, Cliff Soubier as Marryin' Sam, Mauri Cliffer as Humpty Gordon and John

Goldsworthy as Rickette - all could be made available to resume the roles in a resumption of the series.

~~A~~ offering LI'L ABNER for sale ~~for~~ use on any ~~surround~~ of the four networks or on transcription ~~eliminates~~ the ~~obstacle~~ two ~~factors~~ which forestalled NBC efforts to sell the package show, (1) the arbitrarily arrived-at and excessive price, and (2) the inability to clear satisfactory network time.

To those who study the formidable record of the comic strip and the ~~radio~~ <sup>first</sup> show little doubt can exist as to the ability of LI'L ABNER ~~to win~~, hold, and please <sup>assigned</sup> radio listeners - and of the benefit ~~of~~ a sponsor who ~~sold~~ the selling of his product to this show of unlimited appeal. Because LI'L ABNER's appeal is not limited by any classification of listeners, either of youth or lack of youth, of wealth or lack of wealth, of intelligence or lack of it, the variety of products or services which could be offered by the sponsor <sup>such a</sup> ~~the~~ program is the most widely diversified possible.

Too, an innovation pioneered by the builder of the program's style makes it possible to present the commercial message in the most conspicuous way. The fifteen minutes ~~period~~ is divided in three sections of unequal length (as may be seen in the scripts submitted) - the three scenes ~~the~~ suggesting three panels in a comic strip. The first scene, capturing the suspense of the previous episode's and carrying it on, is followed by the commercial announcement and recapitulation. The second scene, or group

8 scenes, constitutes the main body of the drama and ends on a minor climax which parallels the second act curtain of a play. The final commercial is followed by

the third scene, which develops and ~~attempts~~ <sup>interests</sup> the ~~comical situation~~

A suspense that will bring the listener back on the following day. Hence, one cannot ~~and easily~~ mentally ignore the commercial because it is inextricably part of the drama's stream.

Thus, then is the conclusion that is inescapable: LI'L ABNER, his eventful life, and the characters with whom he comes in association and in opposition, are destined to play an entertaining part in the lives of a vast number of radio listeners, ~~and~~ The commercial benefit accruing to his sponsor undoubtedly will be enormous.